

Women at War

**They fight alongside the men
but officially can't join the fight.
Things are changing.**

United States Army Major Brit Erslev dodged **mortar** and rocket fire during her tour of duty in Iraq. As she and the unit she commanded traveled the dangerous streets of Baghdad, "Some of them struck a little too close for comfort," Erslev tells *Scholastic News*.

The dangers Erslev and her troops saw were the kind faced by any other soldier on the ground. But unlike male soldiers, many of whom are expected to see combat, Erslev was not part of a combat unit. Women cannot join ground combat branches of the military. (Women can fly helicopters into combat.)

Tens of thousands of women have fought alongside men since the start of the wars in Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003. But they are **barred** from officially being part of a fighting unit.

Some military experts say it is only a matter of time before that rule changes.

Words to Know

mortar (MOR-tur) *noun*. Very short cannon that fires shells or rockets high in the air.

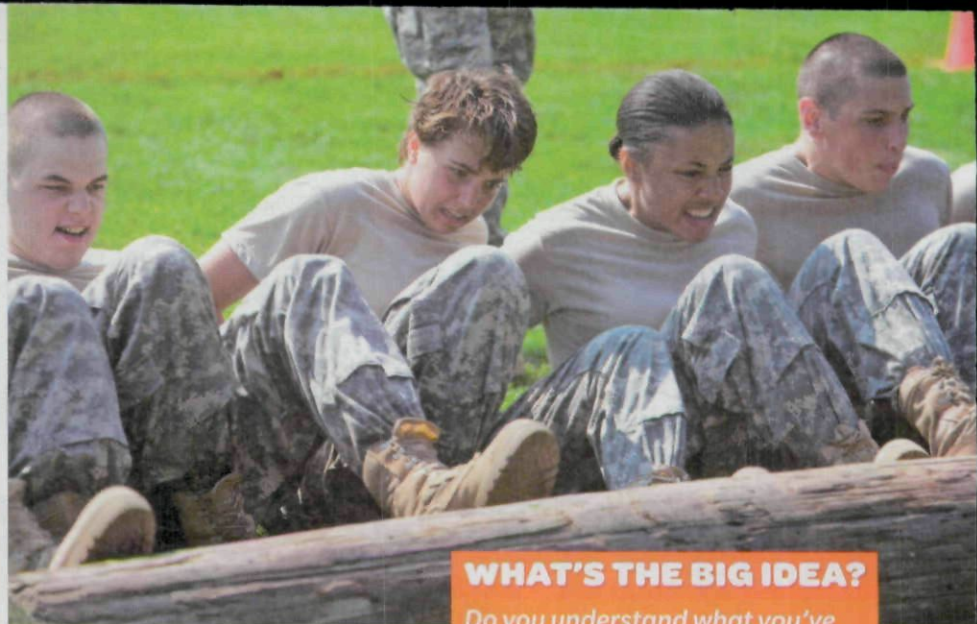
bar (BAR) *verb*. To block someone, or to keep someone out.

A female Marine trains for combat.





Women play key roles in today's military. They are part of many important noncombat units, including those that provide medical services (above). During training (right), they work to the best of their abilities just as men do.



"Female service members have proven that they are every bit as capable as [males]," says Army Lieutenant Colonel John Vigna.

Record of Service

Women have been fighting in the military at least as far back as the Civil War (1861-1865). During that time, hundreds of women disguised themselves as men to take part in the War Between the States. In 1901, the U.S. Army became the first branch of the military to create a unit for women—the all-female Army Nurse Corps. Women were allowed to join all-female noncombat units during World War II (1939-1945). Women today live and fight alongside men, but are still barred from combat.

Equally Important

More than 470,000 women, serve in the U.S. military. That's about 16 percent of all service members.

Many women are part of the unit in which Erslev serves—military intelligence. Officers in this unit collect and analyze information about the enemy. Women in today's military also serve as engineers and medics, as

well as in many other roles.

But in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, even troops in such noncombat units often end up in the middle of the fight. Many female soldiers serve as machine gunners atop military vehicles. Others patrol areas as military police. Many more interact with and search Iraqi and Afghan women for weapons. This is a job that men cannot do because of Iraqi and Afghan customs.

Roles like these are not combat, but, Erslev says, they "are very much needed and important."

Unique Challenges

Allowing women into combat units would create unique challenges, military experts say. Mainly, women do not typically have the same physical strength as men. This would make it difficult for women to do many of the tasks required of combat troops. However, more than a dozen countries, including Canada, already allow women in some or all ground combat units.

It is unlikely that the U.S. would change its rules while battling two wars. But Vigna says he believes "that more and more combat positions will be

WHAT'S THE BIG IDEA?

Do you understand what you've just read? Test yourself with these reading-comprehension questions!

1. What is this story mainly about?
2. The quote "Some of them struck a little too close for comfort" shows that Erslev was feeling what emotions?
3. What is the main challenge to allowing women into combat branches?
4. What are some dangerous jobs women have been doing in Iraq and Afghanistan?

BACK TO YOU

Do you think women should be allowed into the combat units of the U.S. military? Why or why not?

opened to women in the future."

Experts agree that if change does occur, it ought to be gradual—and for the right reasons.

"It should not be that women are allowed into the combat arms because that's the only way they can be equal to men—that's not true," says Erslev. "[Women] are contributing to the fight in the roles that we have now. We are making a difference too."

—Jennifer Marino Walters

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